

# Demythologizing the Narratives of the Qur'an: Muḥammad 'Abduh's and Bint al-Shāṭi's Account of 'Ād, Thamūd, and Pharaoh, Q. 89: 6-10<sup>1</sup>

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## ملخص

يحتوي القرآن على كثير من القصص التي تسرد الأحداث التي وقعت قبل نزول القرآن بزمان بعيد ومنها قصص الرسل وأقوامهم بدءاً من سيدنا آدم وإلى عهد الرسول صلى الله عليه وسلم. وقد روي بعض المفسرين القدماء مثل الطبري تلك القصص بصورة تفصيلية لا يستندون بالقران فحسب ولكنهم يستندون على الروايات أيضاً. وقد يكون لقصة واحدة أكثر من رواية بما فيها التلفيقات الإسرائيلية. ويختلف عن هؤلاء المفسرين المفسرون المعاصرون فانهم يميلون إلى عدم ذكر القصص بصورة كاملة ولكنهم يذكرون الجوانب المهمة فقط من تلك القصص ثم يفسرون الحكم الموجود فيها ويربطونها مع الحياة المعاصرة. ويحاول الكاتب في هذا المقال إلقاء الضوء على منهج المفسرين الثاني متمثلاً في محمد عبده وعائشة بنت الشاطئ وذلك عن تفسيرهما لقصة قوم عاد وثمود وفرعون.

<sup>1</sup>The paper was presented at Faculty Club of Concordia University, Montreal Canada, June 5-6, 1999.

## Abstrak

Dalam al-Qur'an terdapat banyak cerita (kisah) yang terjadi jauh sebelum al-Qur'an diturunkan seperti kisah tentang rasul-rasul dan ummatnya sejak Adam hingga Muhammad. Para mufassir klasik seperti Tabari sering menceritakan secara detail kisah-kisah tersebut yang berdasarkan tidak hanya pada al-Qur'an, tapi lebih pada riwayat-riwayat. Masing-masing kisah sering mempunyai beberapa versi lengkap sebagaimana kisah-kisah *isrā'iliyāt*. Berbeda dengan mufassir klasik, para mufassir modern cenderung tidak menceritakan secara lengkap cerita-cerita tersebut. Mereka mencoba untuk memahami bagian-bagian penting dari kisah-kisah tersebut dan menginterpretasikan nilai-nilai yang terkandung di dalam kisah tersebut dalam konteks modern ini. Artikel ini mencoba untuk melihat pendekatan dua mufassir modern, yaitu Muhammad 'Abduh dan 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Rahmān Bint al-Shāti', dalam menginterpretasikan kisah kaum 'Ād, Thamūd dan Fir'aun dalam al-Qur'an.

## I. Introduction

The Qur'ān contains many narratives (*qasas*),<sup>2</sup> which circulated before or at the time of its revelation<sup>3</sup> — e.i., tales which tell of the Prophets and their peoples, from Adam to Muḥammad himself.<sup>4</sup> Classical exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī<sup>5</sup> often provide further details for the

<sup>2</sup>The Qur'ān itself claims this, see for instance Q. 12: 3, "We narrate unto thee (Muḥammad) the best of narratives (*aḥsan al-qasas*)..." trans. by Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Glorious Koran: A Bilingual Edition with English Translation, Introduction and Notes* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969) 301-2.

<sup>3</sup>Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 1-3.

<sup>4</sup>This is known as *qisās al-anbiyā'*, see for instance al-Tha'labī, *Kitāb Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā' al-Muṣammā bi al-'Arā'is* (Cairo: Al-Maṭba'ah al-Kaṣṭāliyah, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup>Abū Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (224/5-310/839-923 CE) was a famous classical interpreter who mostly based his interpretation on the tradition of the Prophet; on his life, see Andrew Rippin, "al-Ṭabarī," *ER* 14, 231-3; R. Paret, "al-Ṭabarī," *EI* 8, 578-9; Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1937) 142; Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ḥūfi, *Al-Ṭabarī* (Cairo: A'lām al-'Arab, 1962). Tabari's *tafsīr* is *Jāmi' al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1986-7).

stories, which they drew from sources other than the Qur'ān, basing themselves on some *riwāyāt*. Each narrative often had several complete versions that existed independently of the Qur'ān, such as in the case of the *isrā'īliyyāt*.<sup>6</sup> Modern exegetes, on the other hand, have attempted a new reading of these narratives. Instead of retelling the complete story, they recount parts of it, trying to give these a modern context by explaining the moral lessons to be derived therefrom. This was the approach of two prominent modern commentators,<sup>7</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh and 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi'. This paper will focus on their respective accounts of the 'Ād, the Thamūd and Pharaoh in Q. 89: 6-10.

Q. 89: 6-10:

...Dost thou not consider how thy Lord dealt with (the tribe of) 'Ād,  
With many-columned Iram  
The like of which was not created in the Lands;  
And with (tribe of) Thamūd, who clove the rocks in the valley;  
And with Pharaoh, firm of might,...<sup>8</sup>

## II. 'Abduh's *Tafsīr*

Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), who has been described as a rationalist, a reformist, a modernist, and even a neo-Mu'tazilite,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>For the history of *isrā'īliyyāt* in early *tafsīr* see Ignaz Goldziher, *Madhāhib al-Tafsīr al-Islāmī*, trans. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm al-Najjār (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1955) 75.

<sup>7</sup>Both are considered modern Qurānic exegetes. See, J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974) 9 and 17. Especially Bint al-Shāṭi' is also regarded as a modern Egyptian feminist; see Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) 120-3.

<sup>8</sup>Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Glorious Koran* 805.

<sup>9</sup>For Muḥammad 'Abduh's biography, see "Mulakhkhaṣ Sīrat al-Ustādh al-Imām," ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Manār* 8 (1315H.): 377-416; Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh* (Cairo: Dār al-Mānār, 1931), especially in vol. 1; Hillal Dessouki, " 'Abduh, Muḥammad," *ER* 1, 5-6; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) 130-60; Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966); Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muḥammad 'Abduh* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933); idem,

interpreted these three important historical actors in the Qur'ān — namely the 'Ād, the Thamūd and Pharaoh — by referring to historical fact and logical evidence as sources. In reference to the 'Ād (Q. 89: 6), he informs us that they were “a race of Arab *bā'idah* (extinct) or *aribah* (distinct).” Next he provides their genealogy — 'Ād ibn 'Aūs ibn Iram ibn Sām ibn Nūh, but, does not mention his source for this information. Questioning the validity of the genealogy, he explains that the Qur'ān meant by this passage only that the 'Ād were a well-known Arab race.<sup>10</sup> Basing himself again on his unknown sources, he tells us that the 'Ād inhabited Rammāl, Aḥqāf, and Haḍramawt. The Qurān takes the 'Ād here as a symbol of strength and greatness, for they built a city with tall houses.<sup>11</sup> 'Abduh explicitly refuses to go into any more detail about the 'Ād, unlike previous interpreters, but he does not specify which interpreters he had in mind. He is most likely referring to classical interpreters, such as al-Ṭabārī, al-Zamaksharī, etc., whom Bint al-Shāṭi' would later discuss in her *tafsīr*.

In his discussion of the Thamūd (Q. 89: 9),<sup>12</sup> 'Abduh states that this tribe included many Arab *bā'idah*. As he does with the 'Ād, he gives the genealogy of the Thamūd (Thamūd ibn Kāthir ibn Iram ibn Sām). In his explanation of the Kāthir and Iram, he states that the Kāthir mentioned in the Qur'ān are the Jāthir in the Old Testament, just as the Iram are the Āram in the Old Testament.<sup>13</sup> He questions the validity of this genealogy,

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“Muḥammad 'Abduh, the Reformer,” *The Muslim World* 19 (1929): 264-73; Maḥmūd al-Ḥaḳ, *Muḥammad 'Abduh: A Study of a Modern Thinker of Egypt* (Calcutta: The Little Flower Press, 1970); Khoiruddin Nasution, “The Concept of Ijmā' in the Modern Age with Particular Reference to Muḥammad 'Abduh” (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1995) 4-10.

<sup>10</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Al-Qurān al-Karīm, Juz' 'Āmm* (Cairo: al-Maṭba'ah al-'Amīriyah, n.d.) 78.

<sup>11</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* 79.

<sup>12</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* 79.

<sup>13</sup> Aram in the Bible refers to the territory of Syria around the Euphrates. The nomad inhabitants of Aram were called 'Aramim' or "Arameans" (Deut. 26: 5). The Bible's mentions of Aram include: (1) Aram-Naharim, Egyptians who lived around Euphrates; (2) Aram-Zobah, the name of a city; (3) Aram-Rehob, the name of a city. (4). Aram-Maachah and Aram-Geshur, the name of a petty kingdom; (5) Aram-Dameshek, the region around Damascus. 'Abduh possibly intends Aram-Geshur, but he indicates this to be the name of person. This is unlikely according to the Bible, Aram is a large kingdom whose people worshipped various deities (II Macc. 12: 26). The kingdom had contacts and wars with Israel (Judges 3: 8-10) and (II Sam. 8 and 10). See, Simon Cohen, “Aram,” in *The Universal Jewish Encyclopaedia*, ed. Isaac Landman 1 (New York: The Universal Jewish Encyclopaedia, Inc., 1940) 448-50.

arguing that the Thamūd in the end were simply a well-known race of Arabs like the 'Ād. The Thamūd suggest a strong physique and mind, since they had the ability to build rock houses in valleys or dams for agricultural purposes. This indicates that the Thamūd were as well-developed as the 'Ād.

'Abduh explains that the Pharaoh mentioned in the passage (Q. 89: 10)<sup>14</sup> was the ruler of Egypt in the time of Moses. He shows that there is disagreement over the interpretation of the term *dhī al-awṭād*, with some saying that it refers to Pharaoh's armies, and others claiming that it is Pharaoh's "game." Again 'Abduh fails to specify which interpreters he means. In the end he identifies the *awṭād* with Egypt's architectural wonders, which stand today.

Indeed, the term *awṭād* means the great buildings which still exist now. How beautiful are the buildings which were left by Old Egyptians which are pyramidlike, firm, large, and have solid foundations. One views them with admiration for seen at ground level they are huge and yet as they go higher they end in a very small point. This is what the term *awṭād* of Pharaoh means.<sup>15</sup>

### Evaluation and Comment

'Abduh's interpretation of the narratives of the Qur'ān does not dwell on details but aims instead at pointing out its *'ibrah* (moral lesson) for human beings — "the narratives (in the Qur'ān) indeed are aimed at giving examples and moral lessons."<sup>16</sup> The 'Ād, the Thamūd and Pharaoh are mentioned because they rebelled and showed iniquity, so God heaped disaster upon them, as recorded in the verses that follow immediately after our passage "Who all were rebellious in these lands, and multiplied iniquity, therefore thy Lord poured on them the disaster of His punishment."<sup>17</sup> This is a kind of warning to other humans not to repeat these deeds.

'Abduh demythologizes and rationalizes the five verses (Q. 89: 6-10) by interpreting them in the light of historical and logical fact. As a rationalist, he preferred to use reason rather than accept the detailed stories given

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<sup>14</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* 79.

<sup>15</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* 79-80.

<sup>16</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Durūs min al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dar Ihyā' al-'Ulūm, 1980) 29; idem, "Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm, Qiṣṣat Hūd 'Alayh al-Salām," ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Manār* 34 (1315H.) 321, in interpreting Q. 7: 50-2; idem, "Qiṣṣat Šāliḥ 'Alayh al-Salām," ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Manār* 34 (1315H.) 328, in interpreting Q. 7: 61-3.

<sup>17</sup> Q. 89: 11 and 12, trans. by Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Glorious Koran* 805.

by classical interpreters. His accounts are clear, decisively anti-*taqlid* (which consists of following blindly the opinions of others) and rationalist. He was also openly reform-minded,<sup>18</sup> offering a new concept of understanding of the narratives which sought not to prove the validity of the narratives or to give further details, but to extract the moral lessons inherent in them. As a neo-Mu'tazilite, he approached the Qur'ān from a modern rational perspective. But, whereas Mu'tazilites of the past relied on Greek philosophy and logic,<sup>19</sup> 'Abduh used a modern thinking in sweeping away the myths and irrational elements in the stories of the Qur'ān, and in emphasizing logical and factual evidence, although it is also true that both 'Abduh and the Mu'tazilites tried to reconcile reason with revelation.<sup>20</sup>

### III. Bint al-Shāṭi's Tafsīr

Bint al-Shāṭi', who was trained as a philologist,<sup>21</sup> uses a linguistic approach to the story of the 'Ād, the Thamūd, and Pharaoh. First, like 'Abduh, she refutes previous interpretations, although unlike him she specifies those whom she refutes, among them al-Ṭabārī, al-Zamakhsharī,<sup>22</sup> al-

<sup>18</sup>For a characterization of the modern rational thinker, especially in Islamic jurisprudence, see Subhī Maḥmaṣānī, "Muslims: Dependence and Renaissance, Adaptation of Islamic Jurisprudence to Modern Social Needs," *The Muslim World* 44 (1954) 186.

<sup>19</sup>See for instance, the prominent Mu'tazilite exegete al-Zamakhsharī for his linguistic approach where he maintains the role of reason in his *al-Kashshaf 'an Ḥaqāiq al-Tanzil wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Tā'wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.); Lutpi Ibrāhīm, "the Relation of Reason and Revelation in the Theology of al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī," *Islamic Culture* 54 (1980) 63.

<sup>20</sup>'Abduh's rationality was basically theological; see Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Risālah al-Tawḥīd*, trans. by Ishāq Mūsā and Kenneth Cragg as *The Theology of Unity* (London: George Allen and Unwind, 1966) 11; Khoiruddin Nasution, "The Concept of Ijma..." 8-9; on the rationality of Mu'tazilites, see Abū Zayd, *Al-Ittijāh al-'Aqlī fī al-Tafsīr: Dirāsah fī Qaḍīyah al-Majāz fī al-Qur'ān 'inda al-Mu'tazilah* (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 1982) 59-60. On the influences of Mu'tazilites principles in Mu'tazilite' interpretation of the Qur'ān, see L. Gardet Anawati and M.M. Anawati, *Introduction à la Théologie Musulmane: Essai de Théologie Comparée* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948) 49.

<sup>21</sup>On her life and works, see Muḥammad Amin, "A Study of Bint al-Shāṭi's Exegesis," (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1992) 6-23; Tāhir Ṭanāḥī, "Bint al-Shāṭi'," *al-Hilāl* 59 (1951): 26-7; C. Kooij, "Bint al-Shāṭi': A Suitable Case for Biography?," in Ibrahim A. El-Sheykh, C. Aart van de Koppel and Rudolph Peters, eds., *The Challenge of the Middle East* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, Institute for Modern Near Eastern Studies, 1982) 67-72.

<sup>22</sup>Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī (469-538/1075-1144 CE) was a famous Mu'tazilite interpreter who introduced linguistic approach in interpreting the Qur'ān, for his biography see Brockelmann, "al-Zamakhsharī," *EI*, 1205-7; idem,

Rāzī,<sup>23</sup> and even Abū Ḥayyān.<sup>24</sup> She discusses the details they provide, and yet she concludes, like 'Abduh, that the purpose of the narrative in Q. 89: 6-10 is to offer a moral lesson to human beings.

In discussing the 'Ād (Q. 89: 6),<sup>25</sup> for instance, Bint al-Shāṭi' expands 'Abduh's interpretation through her use of the opinions of classical interpreters rejected by the latter. She shows al-Ṭabārī's information about *Iram dhāt al-imād* (Q. 89: 7); the name of the land inhabited by the 'Ād. For Abū Ḥayyān, *Iram* meant a great city located in Yemen, Syria or Haḍramawt, called Rammāl or al-Aḥqāf.<sup>26</sup> For al-Zamakhsharī *Iram* was merely a geographical name that designated the land occupied by the 'Ād.<sup>27</sup>

Bint al-Shāṭi' however refutes the conventional interpretation of *dhāt al-imād* (Q. 89: 7) made by many classical Muslim scholars. They believed that *Iram* referred to an architectural structure, since the 'Ād were architects who constructed columned buildings, castles, towers, and cities. There was even a detailed story about the building of the city of Iram by Shaddād ibn 'Ād. According to this story, Shaddād's age was 900 years. He built the city and in it constructed a beautiful palace made of gold, silver and pearls which lasted for 300 years. But this city was finally destroyed by God, because Shaddād was seeking to reach paradise by building extremely high towers.<sup>28</sup>

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*Geschichte* Sup. 1, 507-13; Andrew Rippin, "al-Zamakhsharī," *ER* 15, 554-5; Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ḥūfi, *Al-Zamakhsharī* (Cairo: Hay'at al-Miṣriyah al-'Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 1977).

<sup>23</sup> Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn 'Umar Ibn H]usayn al-Rāzī (543-606/1149-1209 CE) was a prominent Ash'arite interpreter who referred to Greek philosophy and sciences as a tool for interpreting the Qur'ān. A biography is found in G.C. Anawati, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," *EI2* 2, 752-5; Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, Sup. 1, 920-4; Effat al-Sharqawi, "Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn," *ER* 12, 221-2; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," in M.M. Sharif, ed., *A History of Philosophy: with Short Accounts of Other Disciplines in the Modern Renaissance in Muslim Lands I* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1963) 642-56. Al-Rāzī's *tafsīr* is *Mafātiḥ al-Ghayb* or *Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Iḥyā al-Turāth wa al-'Arābī, n.d.).

<sup>24</sup> Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad ibn Yūsūf (1256-1344 CE), for his biography see Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, Sup. 2, 135.

<sup>25</sup> See 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī li al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1990) 138-9.

<sup>26</sup> Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* 8 (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, n.d.) 469.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqāiq al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqawīl fi Wujūh al-Ta'wīl* 4 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'ārifah, n.d.) 59.

<sup>28</sup> 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī* 1, 139.

The word '*imād*' has the same root as "*amūd*," which means strong, which is significant what with the 'Ād having been known for their strength as a tribe. '*AMD*' is mentioned in other verses (Q. 13:2 and 31: 10), but '*imād*' in 89: 7 has a particular meaning<sup>29</sup> which differs from that found in other verses, namely, "strong." The word '*iram*' in 89: 7 is mentioned only once in the Qur'ān.<sup>30</sup> Bint al-Shāṭi' questions the meaning of '*iram*' given by some interpreters. For her, the proper account of the 'Ād and of '*iram*', based on the Qur'ān, is that 'Ād existed at the time of Hūd and occupied the Aḥqāf. There is no other possibility of interpreting these terms beyond what the Qur'ān says of them, i.e. that '*Iram*' was either in Syria or Haḍramawt, or some other region.

The best meaning of '*Imād*' (pillar) is strong and high place, for the understanding in the Arabic language that a high pillar, without giving details about its measure, its builder, name of the person to whom it belongs, or any other details which are not related to the Qur'ān at all, and not suitable in meaning. Therefore, for us, it is enough to understand the verse just based on the text (of the Qur'ān)...<sup>31</sup>

Finally, Bint al-Shāṭi' refers as well to the other verses of the Qur'ān which mention the 'Ād, such as Q. 46: 21 and 25, 11: 50, 53, 59, and 60, 50: 13, etc. The Qur'ān mentions the 'Ād a total of fourteen times, but nowhere does it say anything of their genealogy, strength, or their ability at building towers. It only states that 'Ād existed at the time of Hūd, and that they betrayed him as a Prophet.

Likewise, in dealing with the Thamūd, Bint al-Shāṭi' relies on the explanation of other verses of the Qur'ān, allowing no other details external to the Qur'ān to be considered. She rejects furthermore the information furnished by previous interpreters. One such interpreter held that the Thamūd was a strong race of men who built 1700 rock houses in the valley where they dwelled, while another claims that they built a dam by which they redirected water in that valley. For Bint al-Shāṭi', the Thamūd were an

<sup>29</sup> She maintains that every word of the Qur'ān has its own meaning; see her *al-I'jāz al-Bayānī li al-Qur'ān wa Masā'il Ibn al-Azraq* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1971) 282-3; Issa J. Boullata, "Poetry Citation as Interpretative Illustration in Qur'an Exegesis: *Masā'il Nāfi' Ibn al-Azraq*," in Wael B. Hallaq and Donald P. Little, eds., *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles C. Adams* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991) 32; as Boullata comments "...it offers refreshing insights into Qur'ān exegesis in modern times," this comment is also echoed by Muḥammad Amin, "A Study of Bint al-Shāṭi's..." 88.

<sup>30</sup> 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī* 1, 143.

<sup>31</sup> 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī* 1, 143.

Arab *bā'idah* tribe, as 'Abduh said, who lived at the time of Šālih, after the 'Ād's generation. The Qur'ān mentions the Thamūd 26 times in other verses (14: 9, 25: 38, 29: 38, 22: 42, 53: 51, etc.), according to her calculations.<sup>32</sup>

In dealing with the puzzling form *wād* (Q. 89: 9), which the Qur'ān relates to the Thamūd, Bint Shāṭi' invokes other verses which mention it (14: 38, 27: 18, 20: 12, 28: 30 and 79: 16, where the word means in every case "cutting"). Hence, the Thamūd literally cut the rocks in the valley for their houses; other verses support the assertion that the Thamūd had houses (Q. 11: 95 and 97, Q. 7: 77 and 90). All verses describe the Thamūd as unbelievers and doers of evil.

In her interpretation of the verse referring to Pharaoh, she employs the same method as she did for those dealing with the 'Ād and the Thamūd. She presents various interpretations which she later rejects, especially those dealing with the word *awtād* (Q. 89: 10). For al-Zamakhsharī *awtād* implies that the Pharaoh had many armies, while for al-Ṭabarī, who accepted the tradition that the Pharaoh persecuted many people, it refers to the game of *awtād* where he used to torture victims with irons — since *awtād* originally meant iron. After evaluating the evidence, Bint Shāṭi' opts for 'Abduh's explanation that the *awtād* is a pyramid-like structure.

Bint al-Shāṭi' reconstructs the narratives on Pharaoh based on what the Qur'ān alone says. The Pharaoh mentioned in the verses was the Pharaoh of the time of Moses. The Qur'ān does not provide the dates or the name of the "Pharaoh" referred to; ancient Egypt was ruled by many Pharaohs. However, the Qur'ān informs us that Pharaoh was very wealthy and rich (Q. 10: 88), was excessive in behavior (Q. 10: 83), committed great sins (20: 24 and 43), built great structures reaching far into the sky (Q. 28: 38), for which he was finally destroyed by God (Q. 7: 137).<sup>33</sup>

Bint al-Shāṭi' holds that no further details can be given about the 'Ād, the Thamūd and Pharaoh other than those stated above:

Where do the details of the stories in many exegeses derive from? The Prophet never taught anything to his people except what is revealed in the Qur'ān. Probably they derived from *isrā'īliyyāt* which were brought by Jews [as a contribution] to the understanding of our religion. And various Interpreters relied for some unreasonable myths on the Torah.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Rahmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī* 1, 143-4.

<sup>33</sup> 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Rahmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī* 1, 145.

<sup>34</sup> 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Rahmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī* 1, 146.

## Evaluation and Comment

Bint al-Shāṭi' agrees with 'Abduh's principle that the narratives of the Qur'ān about the 'Ād, the Thamūd, and Pharaoh are intended as 'ibrah or moral lessons, as examples for human beings. In interpreting these narratives (Q. 8: 6-10), she ignores all other sources, believing that the Qur'ān gives the explanation it intends and that extraneous materials are foreign to this intention.<sup>35</sup> For Bint al-Shāṭi' interpreting the narratives does not require the addition of further details, since these are not based on the Qur'ān itself but are derived from external sources<sup>36</sup> such as Jewish-Christian Biblical material and Arab and non-Arab mythology,<sup>37</sup> employed extensively by classical interpreters. Bint al-Shāṭi' insists, as Issa J. Boullata points out, that we must "let the Qur'ān speak for itself."<sup>38</sup> For additional information, she invokes other Qur'ānic verses which deal with the same subject, but she recognizes that every word has a meaning which may differ from that of others; in fact, she asserts, that there are almost no synonyms in the Qur'ān.<sup>39</sup>

Bint al-Shāṭi''s interpretation of the narrative (Q. 89: 6-10) appears to be influenced by 'Abduh's,<sup>40</sup> especially where Bint al-Shāṭi' elaborates on 'Abduh's refutation and final conclusion, doing so in support of his position. However, Bint al-Shāṭi' employs a different method than simply relying on logical evidence. Rather, she compares verses to one another which deal with the same subject, trying understand the context as a whole, not

<sup>35</sup> 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī*, 10. She states that the Qur'ān may be interpreted strictly on its own terms. See also Muḥammad Amin, "A Study of Bint al-Shāṭi''s..." 28. It has been argued that her method was that of her husband Amīn al-Khūli (1895-1966), see 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Min Asrār al-'Arabīyah fī al-Bayān al-Qur'ānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Aḥad, 1972), 9-10; on Amīn al-Khūli, among other sources, see Sa'fān, *Amīn al-Khūli* (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 1982). For a review of her method, see Issa J. Boullata, "Modern Qur'ān Exegesis,..." 103-13.

<sup>36</sup> See 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *Al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī*, 143.

<sup>37</sup> Issa J. Boullata, "Modern Qur'ān Exegesis: A Study of Bint al-Shāṭi''s Method," *The Muslim World*, 64 (1974) 105 and 108.

<sup>38</sup> Issa J. Boullata, "Modern Qur'ān Exegesis..." 107; idem, "The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'ān: Tījāz and Related Topics," in Andrew Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 152-4.

<sup>39</sup> Issa J. Boullata, "Modern Qur'ān Exegesis..." 109.

<sup>40</sup> As Amīn al-Khūli admired 'Abduh, see his *Manāḥij al-Tajdīd* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1961); Muḥammad Amin, "A Study of bint al-Shāṭi''s..." 24-5.

separately, and as universal meaning.<sup>41</sup> She also presents many possible readings suggested by classical scholars like Abū Ḥayyān, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī of *'ād iraman (iḍāfah)* or *'ādīn irama ('aṭf bayān)* (Q. 89: 6-7), and gives their explanations of these words and their function in Arabic sentence structure and grammar. She also, however, criticizes the use of grammar by classical exegetes in judging the meaning of the passages of the Qur'ān.<sup>42</sup> She prefers instead to concentrate on the stylistic characteristics of the Qur'ān.<sup>43</sup>

#### IV. Comparative Reflection

Both 'Abduh and Bint al-Shāṭi' held to the same view that the narrative in Q. 89: 6-10, dealing with the 'Ād, Thamūd and Pharaoh, serves as a moral lesson and example for human beings. In interpreting the three stories, 'Abduh and Bint al-Shāṭi' disagree with their predecessors who were satisfied with themselves adding further details to them. They choose instead to demythologize the story by providing more logical and reasonable interpretations. In fact, the influence of 'Abduh's principles on Bint al-Shāṭi' is clear. Bint al-Shāṭi' even explains what 'Abduh had refused to, particularly by giving the names of interpreters she disagreed with, the title of their works, and the opinions which 'Abduh missed. Finally, in interpreting the three historical phenomena, Bint al-Shāṭi cites and quotes 'Abduh's opinion, supporting in particular 'Abduh's argument about the meaning of *awṭād* (Q. 89: 10) as a lofty building of pyramidal shape. For both modern exegetes, the most important aspect of understanding of the narratives of the 'Ād, the Thamūd and the Pharaoh of Q. 89: 6-10, is the moral message, not their detailed content of the narratives.

In approaching the narratives in Q. 89: 6-10, 'Abduh hopes to balance reason with revelation; for in his mind neither one contradicts the other. In doing so, he presents rational and logical evidence. Bint al-Shāṭi agrees with this, but her method differs in that she adopts a linguistic approach. She gives the meaning by comparing one verse with others and analyzing the meaning of the passages from the perspectives of the style and lan-

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<sup>41</sup>The good illustration of this is in her discussion about "human being" in her *al-Qur'ān wa Qaḍāyā al-Insān* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm al-Malāyīn, 1982).

<sup>42</sup>See Muḥammad Amin, "A Study of bint al-Shāṭi's..." 35-6; Issa J. Boullata, "Modern Qur'ān Exegesis..." 105.

<sup>43</sup>Issa J. Boullata, "Modern Qur'ān Exegesis..." 113.

guage of in Qur'ān. In short, we may clearly distinguish the position of 'Abduh as that of a rationalist, and Bint Shāṭi's as that of a philologist.

'Abduh and Bint Shāṭi' differ in a number of other respects. 'Abduh's position is like that of the Mutaziltes. Rationalizing the narratives, he insists that they are amenable to reason, not unreasonable myth. The illustration of his factual evidence is that the 'Ād and the Thamūd in the Q. 89: 6-9 existed in history, as they were well known to the Arabs. This evidence indicates that they were not simply mythological. 'Abduh also relies on facts and sources besides the Qur'ān, such as the Torah, in the case of Jāthir and Iram. On the other hand, Bint al-Shāṭi finds the meaning the Qur'ān in the Qurān, setting aside outside sources apart from the latter, especially attacking the case of *isrā'iliyyāt*.<sup>44</sup> In practical life, 'Abduh's attitude resembles somewhat more a Western approach, in that he tries to reconcile modern thought with the Qur'ān.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, Bint al-Shāṭi is anti-Zionist and anti-colonialist, in insisting on the independence of the Qur'ān she also rejects interpretation of the Qur'ān based on modern science and technology.<sup>46</sup> This may possibly explain the difference in their views of *tafsīr*. In sum, 'Abduh rationalizes the Qur'ān, whereas Bint al-Shāṭi' emphasizes its independence and self-sufficiency.

## V. The Gap that 'Abduh and Bint Shāṭi' Left

One may nevertheless take issue with 'Abduh's and Bint Shāṭi's desacralization and demythologization of the narratives (Q. 89: 6-10). The Qur'ān is a holy scripture, revealed in response to its environment, which consisted of local beliefs, customs and traditions in the pre-Islamic age or at the time of revelation. This included Arab,<sup>47</sup> Jewish<sup>48</sup> and Christian<sup>49</sup> tra-

<sup>44</sup>See also her *Al-Isrā'iliyyāt fi Ghazw al-Fikrī* (Cairo: al-Buḥūth wa al-Dirāsāt al-'Arabīyah, 1975).

<sup>45</sup>Charles C. Adams, "Muḥammad 'Abduh,..." 273.

<sup>46</sup>See her debate with physician Mustafā Maḥmūd, in her *al-Qur'ān wa al-Tafsīr al-'Aṣrī, Hadhā Balāgh li al-Nās* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1970). Maḥmūd's views are collected in *al-Qur'ān: Muḥāwala li Fahm 'Aṣrī li al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Rūz al-Yūsūf Press, 1970). See also Issa J. Boullata, "Modern Qur'ān Exegesis:..." 108; Yudian Wahyudi, "'Ali Sharī'atī and Bint al-Shāṭi' on Free Will: A Comparison," [forthcoming] *Journal of Islamic Studies* 9 (1998) 34.

<sup>47</sup>For instance Toshihiko Izutsu shows the interaction between the pre-Islamic and Qur'ānic values. According to him, although the Qur'ān changed some concepts and Arabic *jāhili* values, some Islamic values are still a continuation of Arabic pre Islamic values such *ḥālim* and *muruwah*. See, his *Man and God in the Koran* (New York: Books for

ditions. It is possible to disagree with the concept of "influences" by these elements on the text of the Qur'ān, but the interaction of these components with the Qur'ān cannot be denied. Likewise, the narratives in the Qur'ān were a response (to the conditions of the time, incorporating myths or folklore), as shown by classical interpreters, but rejected by 'Abduh and Bint al-Shāṭi'. They failed to appreciate the fact that an understanding of the of the Qur'ān depends on and an appreciation of this context. Mohammad Arkoun describes the myths found in the the Qur'ān as "...une expression symbolique de réalités originales et universales."<sup>50</sup> In responding to the myths "..., le Coran comble la conscience en lui proposant une vaste construction symbolique ..." <sup>51</sup> However, both 'Abduh and Bint al-Shāṭi neglect and try to rationalize the narratives. In short, both miss the context of the time of the revelations, viewing the Qur'ān as a rational text, which should be as free from myth as a modern text, a position that leads to reductionism.

Bint al-Shāṭi may be especially criticized for insisting on the independence of the Qur'ān, for interpreting the Qur'ān only through the Qur'ān and discarding external sources, such as *isrā'īliyyāt*. Since the Qur'ān cannot be separated from its context of revelation, she cannot view the Qur'ān as unhistorical and independent of its original environment, i.e., the culture, tradition, beliefs and customs of Mecca and of Medina.<sup>52</sup> The Qur'ān de-

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Libraries, 1980) 189-229; idem, *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran: A Study in Semantics* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1959); idem, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966).

<sup>48</sup> Abraham I. Katsh discusses the relationship between Q. 2 and 3 and the Torah and Judaic Traditions. See, his *Judaism and Islam: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and Its Commentaries* (New York: New York University Press, 1954).

<sup>49</sup> Richard Bell noted the interaction of the revelation of the Qur'ān and Christian traditions which existed at the time of revelation. See his *The Origin of Islam and Its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1926); idem, *Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965); revised by W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970).

<sup>50</sup> Mohammad Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1982) 10.

<sup>51</sup> Mohammad Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran* 12; Mohammad Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, ed. Robert D. Lee (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994) 71-3; Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Muhammad and the Golden Bough* 112.

<sup>52</sup> W. Montgomery Watt and Kenneth Cragg described the condition of Mecca and Medina at the time of revelation. See, Watt's works, *Muhammad's Mecca: History in the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988); idem, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953); idem, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956); Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'ān* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971).

scended within human culture<sup>53</sup> not outside of it. It has been proven by some scholars that the Qur'an cannot be separated from its context of revelation, which was made to a community that comprised many Jews and Christians,<sup>54</sup> as well as pre-Islamic Arab traditions and beliefs. In interpreting Q. 89: 6-10, Bint al-Shāṭi' disregards these elements.

## VI. Conclusion

Muḥammad 'Abduh and Bint al-Shāṭi' sought new dimensions in interpreting the historical narratives connected with the 'Ād, the Thamūd and Pharaoh in Qur'ān: 89: 6-10. 'Abduh rationalizes the narratives by citing factual and logical evidence, refuting all mythical elements given by his predecessors, and recounting the narratives in a modern context by emphasizing the moral lessons contained in them. Bint al-Shāṭi' supports 'Abduh's position, but offers a different, linguistic approach, while also insisting on the independence of the Qur'ān and on interpreting the Qur'ān through the Qur'ān, to the neglect of all outside sources, e.g. *isrā'iliyyāt*. Both 'Abduh and Bint al-Shāṭi' seem to demythologize the narratives, and view the Qur'ān from a modern perspective, and not with one suitable to the time of revelation; hence both are reductionists. Bint al-Shāṭi', in insisting on the independence and self-sufficiency of the Qur'ān, seems to view the Qur'an as being outside of its historical context, neglecting the possible connection of the Qur'ān to outside elements, such as the beliefs, customs, and traditions which existed in pre-Islamic times or at the time of revelation. The revelation of the Qur'ān was after all a response to and interaction with its environment. Furthermore, neither 'Abduh nor Bint al-Shāṭi' succeeds in answering the question of what the significant connection is between the narratives of the 'Ād, the Thamūd, and Pharaoh and these latter sources.

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<sup>53</sup> Marshall S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977) 103-17.

<sup>54</sup> Fazlur Rahman deals with the interaction of Muḥammad and the Muslim community with other community, especially *ahl al-kitāb* ("the people of book") at the time of revelation in his *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), especially the appendices 1 and 2

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